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Policy & Professional Practice
Mary Loftus Levine, Director
Capitol Place, Suite 500
21 Oak Street
Hartford, CT 06106-8001
860-525-5641, 800-842-4316
Fax: 860-725-6328
www.cea.org

Affiliated with the
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Testimony of

Mary Loftus Levine, Director of Policy and Professional Practice
Connecticut Education Association

Before the

Appropriations Committee

RE: Raised Bill No. 1195

"An Act Concerning School Finance Reform"

March 24, 2011

Good afternoon, Senator Harp, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Mary Loftus Levine, Director of Policy and Professional Practice for the Connecticut Education Association, speaking on behalf of over 40,000 teachers working in 162 cities and towns in Connecticut.

We are here to ask you to defer any action on the current Education Cost Sharing (ECS) funding formula and follow the lead of our Governor, Danell Malloy, who, in his budget address, wisely and thankfully sought to convene an ECS Task Force. Governor Malloy asked of our legislative leaders *"... to form a committee to begin convening at the end of the school year, and to report back to [him] on October first. And then [he'll] seek to take that report and turn it into legislation in the next session. We need to fix this formula once and for all, and we will."*

We couldn't agree more, and look forward to working on this important issue. There is much concern about our present system. The foundation is woefully inadequate and not tied to any true cost index, thus unable to drive funds to those who need them the most. Students in high poverty districts are being especially shortchanged. However, the problems with the current system stem not from the ECS formula as designed, but from an inadequate funding commitment coupled with political considerations that trump the goals of equity, fairness, and transparency.

This bill does not solve these and other problems. It exploits them. In fact, the proposed scheme creates more uncertainty for already struggling communities. It allows the State Department of Education, acting in isolation and without guidance or oversight, to define the per pupil foundation. It punitively diverts funding away from our most fiscally challenged districts. And, most troubling, it conflates funding of choice and charters with the constitutional charge of instituting a funding formula that equalizes resources across municipalities based upon their ability to pay.

As a result, Raised Bill 1195 irresponsibly proposes to upend our present system, apparently based on the false premise that choice and charters in and of themselves improve student achievement.

Choice and charters represent a suitable choice for many families that seek such an alternative. However, the overall performance of choice schools, charters in particular, has been made deceptively attractive, leaving some to ask whether charter school zealots are guilty of "gilding the lily". We must not make drastic policy decisions based upon questionable results. I urge you to carefully review the newly released Connecticut-specific charter school study by economist Ed Moscovitch (attached). This study adds to a growing national body of research showing that only one in five charters do a better job than district public schools and that they are not cost-effective to taxpayers.

According to a Stanford study, 87% of US charter schools provide no greater educational opportunity than traditional public schools. And, most shockingly, the report further noted that 37% of charter schools actually deliver results that are worse than traditional neighborhood public schools.[1] In a study released this year, researchers discovered that New York City charter schools serve a different and much less challenged population than traditional schools. This results in taxpayers overfunding New York City charters by $2,500 per pupil, when students' needs are taken into consideration.[2]

Dr. Moscovitch findings show, in a nutshell, that Connecticut charter schools, taken as a whole, neither outperform nor underperform comparable district schools. Across 12 analyses of grade-level CMTs, the enclosed graphs show that there are district schools – often, many district schools – that do a much better job, particularly with low income populations, than do the strongest charter schools. This is hardly cause for redirecting needed funds from our regular neighborhood public schools to experimental schools of choice.

In closing, Connecticut's Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed the constitutional rights of all students to substantially equal educational opportunity. How can a bill that encourages money to leave already fiscally challenged districts provide to all students in those districts the constitutional protection they deserve?

Thank you.

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[1] The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University (2005) analyzed a dataset representing 70% of America's charter school students in its report *"Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States"*. Stanford University, 2005.

[2] The National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado analyzed the funding and outcomes of 60 New York City charter schools in its 2011 report "Fiscal Disparities and Philanthropy among New York City Charter Schools".

CAPE ANN ECONOMICS

40 River Road
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Do Charter Schools Outperform?

Introduction

Charter schools are popular with education reformers, who argue that they are outperforming regular district education schools. This is (or should be) an empirical, rather than an ideological question. This paper presents an examination of the data on charter school performance in Connecticut in relation to district schools with comparable demographics.

Any unbiased analysis has to begin with the unfortunate reality that, all else equal, children from disadvantaged backgrounds perform at lower levels than students who come from what we might think of as "literate" homes - homes with parents who themselves have larger vocabularies, who speak more often with their children and use a richer and broader range of words, and who read aloud to their very young children several times each week.

There's plenty of evidence that, given the right kind of education, disadvantaged children can in fact learn successfully and perform at high levels. Indeed, that's what the charter school debate is about - are charter schools in fact more successful at bringing this about?

Measuring Poverty Rates

For each school and grade-level, the study uses 3 pieces of information from the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMT) - the total number of students tested, the number of low-income students tested, and the average CMT scores (in both math and reading). This information is publicly available on

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the Internet for the last several years. Other than magnet schools, the study includes all district and charter schools for which this information is available.[1]

Using this data, we can calculate the percentage of low-income students in each group and, by taking this into account, compare charter school performance with that of district schools with similar poverty rates.

Because average test scores differ across grade levels, and at any given grade may differ between math, reading, and writing, the comparisons in this study are specific to subject and grade level.

Graphic Comparison

The results of the analysis are shown in a series of charts, one for each grade and subject. The charts are displayed at the end of the paper, by

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[1] CMT results and student counts are unavailable for any test group with fewer than 20 students. Overall results would be available for a school with a 4th grade of 21 students, but if only 18 of them were low-income, the number of low-income students tested (and their average score) would not be published. This means it is not possible to calculate the school's poverty rate; as poverty has such an important impact on test scores, this means it would not be possible to compare such a school with comparable schools. This means that data from some charter (and district) schools is excluded. In 4th grade, there are four charter schools with more than 20 low-income students and three charters with more than 20 4th grade students in total, but fewer than 20 low-income students. The numbers are similar for 4th and 5th grades. In 7th grade (middle school), 7 charters have at least 20 low-income students, 4 that have 20 students over all do not have 20 low-income students, and one had data for 2010 but not for 2009. The numbers of charters for 8th grades are similar to those for 7th grade. In 6th grade, four charter schools have 20 low-income students; two tested 20 students but didn't have 20 that were low-income.

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grade, starting at grade 3 and going through grade 8 - in each case with reading first and then math.)

Example - Grade 3, Reading

The charts are all in identical format. The first chart, for 3rd grade reading, is explained in detail; then some summary conclusions are drawn. The grade 3 charts are for 2010 alone; all other grades are averaged across 2009 and 2010 to minimize any distortion from outlier observations.

In these so-called "bubble charts", the results are displayed as a series of circles, one for each school. The size of the circles is proportional to the number of students tested, so the viewer automatically gives more weight to larger schools. The horizontal position represents the percentage of students tested who are low-income, as defined by the No Child Left Behind Law (that is, eligible for free or reduced cost lunch). The vertical position of each bubble represents the average CMT score. As we'd expect, the bubbles generally run from the upper left (high scores, low poverty) to the lower right (low scores, high poverty). Each chart contains a trend line; this shows a statistical "best fit" of the relationship between poverty percentages and average scores. Another way of understanding the trend line is that any given poverty level (that is, any given vertical line on the chart), the trend line shows the typical CMT score of schools at that poverty rate. The more closely the circles are clustered to the trend line, the tighter the relationship between poverty and test scores.

District schools are shown in blue; charter schools are shown in red. Schools on the same vertical line have the same poverty rate; how any

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given school compares with its peers and with the trend can be determined by comparing it to the other schools directly above and below it.

The vertical distance between the charter school circles and the trend line shows the extent to which they are (or are not) performing at higher levels than comparable district schools. The right-hand side of the chart - the state's highest poverty schools - is of greatest interest. The schools in the upper right - those shown inside the green circle - are the schools that are of greatest interest. These are the schools that are doing the best job of educating low-income students. As we'll see, few of these schools are charter schools.

Continuing with this example, there is one third-grade charter school right on the trend line, three schools somewhat above it, and one below it. On average, then, in third-grade reading charter schools are slightly out-performing district schools with comparable poverty. However, none of the charters has a poverty rate above 80%, and only one comes close to the circle of schools well above the trend line. Virtually all of the high-poverty, high-performing 3rd grade schools are non-magnet district schools (all magnets have been eliminated from these charts, since a school that scores well by selecting only the brightest students is not addressing the underlying problem).

Broad Conclusions

In 3rd grade, only 4 charter schools had enough low-income students to be included in the analysis. In both reading and math, more are above the trend than below. This is also true in 5th, 6th, and 8th grade math. The reverse is true in 4th grade in both reading and math - more of the charters

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are below the trend line than above it; on average charters underperform comparable district schools in 4th grade. This same pattern is seen in 5th grade reading and 7th grade math.

In the remaining charts, the numbers of charters above and below trend are roughly equal.

Taking all the charts together, it is fair to conclude that charters neither underperform nor over-perform comparable district schools.

A common argument in favor of charters is that they serve as beacons of good practice for district schools. If this were the case, we'd expect to see a significant number of charter schools performing well above trend. In fact, this is not the case. To be sure, there are a (very) few very high-performing, high-poverty charter schools. There's one in 3rd grade math and another in 8th grade math. Even in these instances, there are several non-magnet district schools with similarly high performance. In many cases, there are no really high-performing, high-poverty charter schools; this is true in 4th grade (reading and math), in 5th grade math, in 6th grade reading and math, and in 7th and 8th grade reading. In the remaining charts, there's one charter school at the lower edge of the circle of high-performing, high-poverty schools.

Taking these charts as a whole, it's hard to see how a fair-minded observer could conclude that charter schools, taken as a whole, are outperforming comparable district schools, or that there are a significant number of "beacon" charter schools that do a markedly better job of educating low-income students than the best district schools.

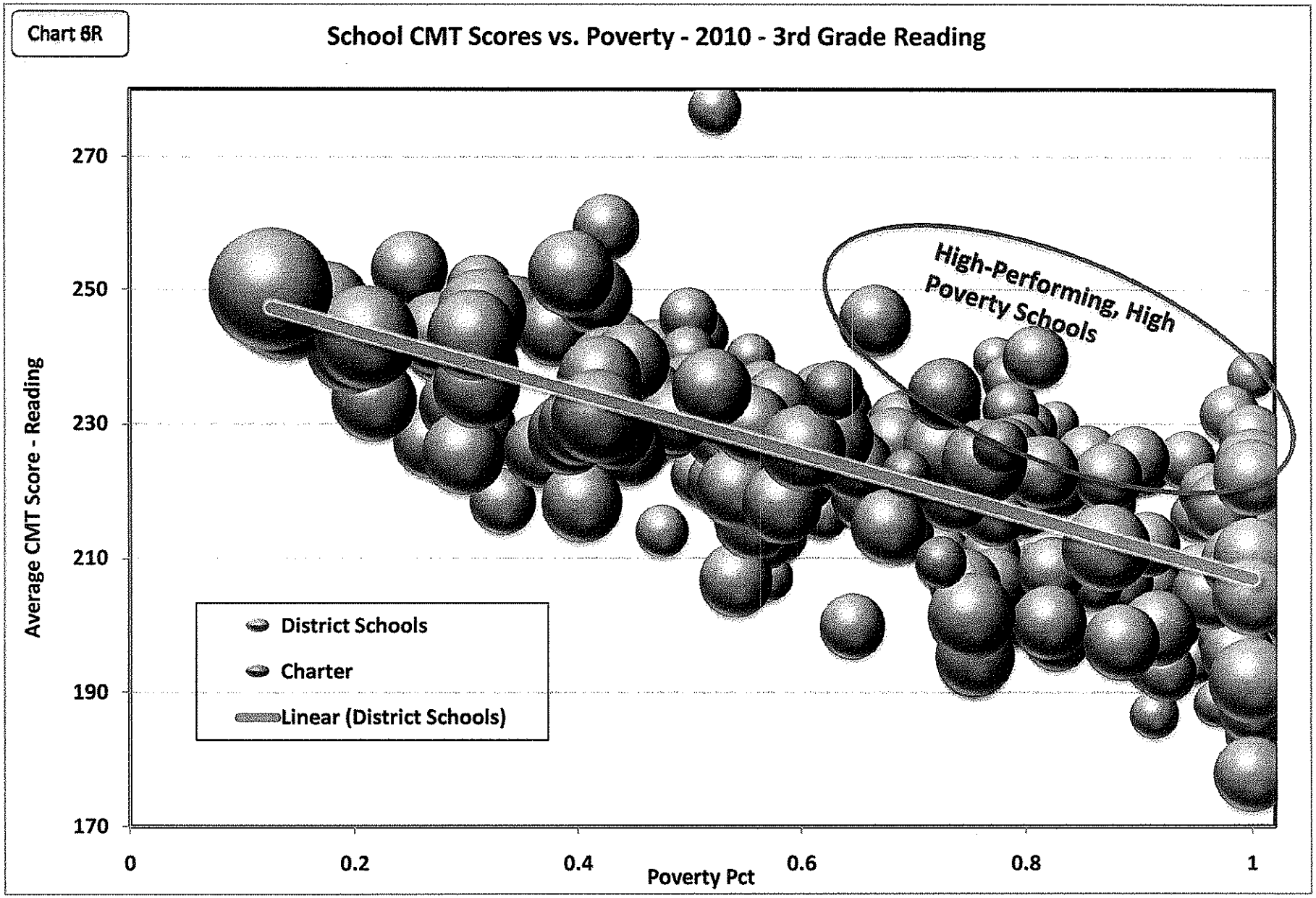
Chart 6R
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - 2010 - 3rd Grade Reading
Average CMT Score - Reading
270
250
230
210
190
170
0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
1
Poverty Pct
High-Performing, High Poverty Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

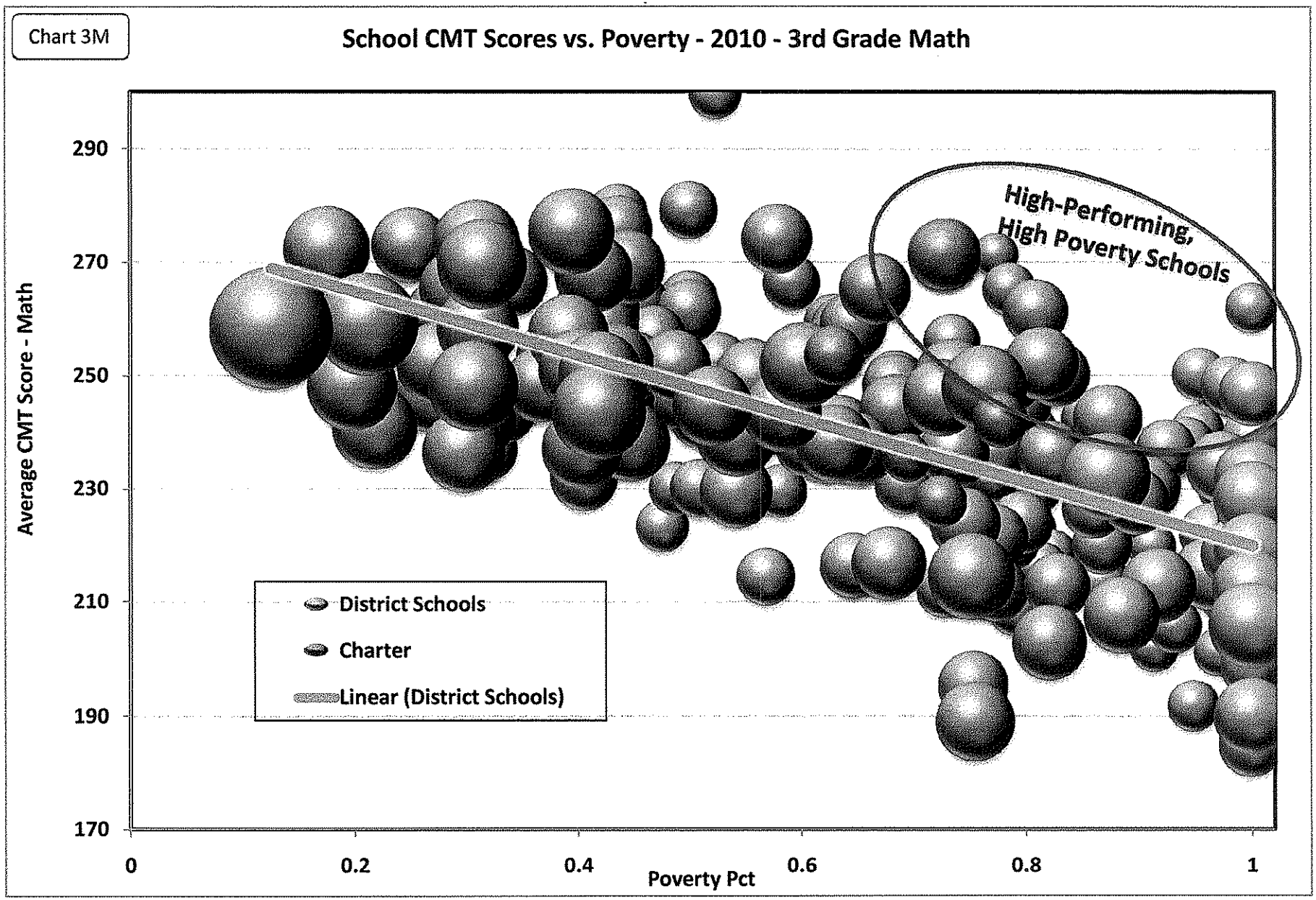
Chart 3M
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - 2010 - 3rd Grade Math
Average CMT Score - Math
290
270
250
230
210
190
170
0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
1
Poverty Pct
High-Performing, High Poverty Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

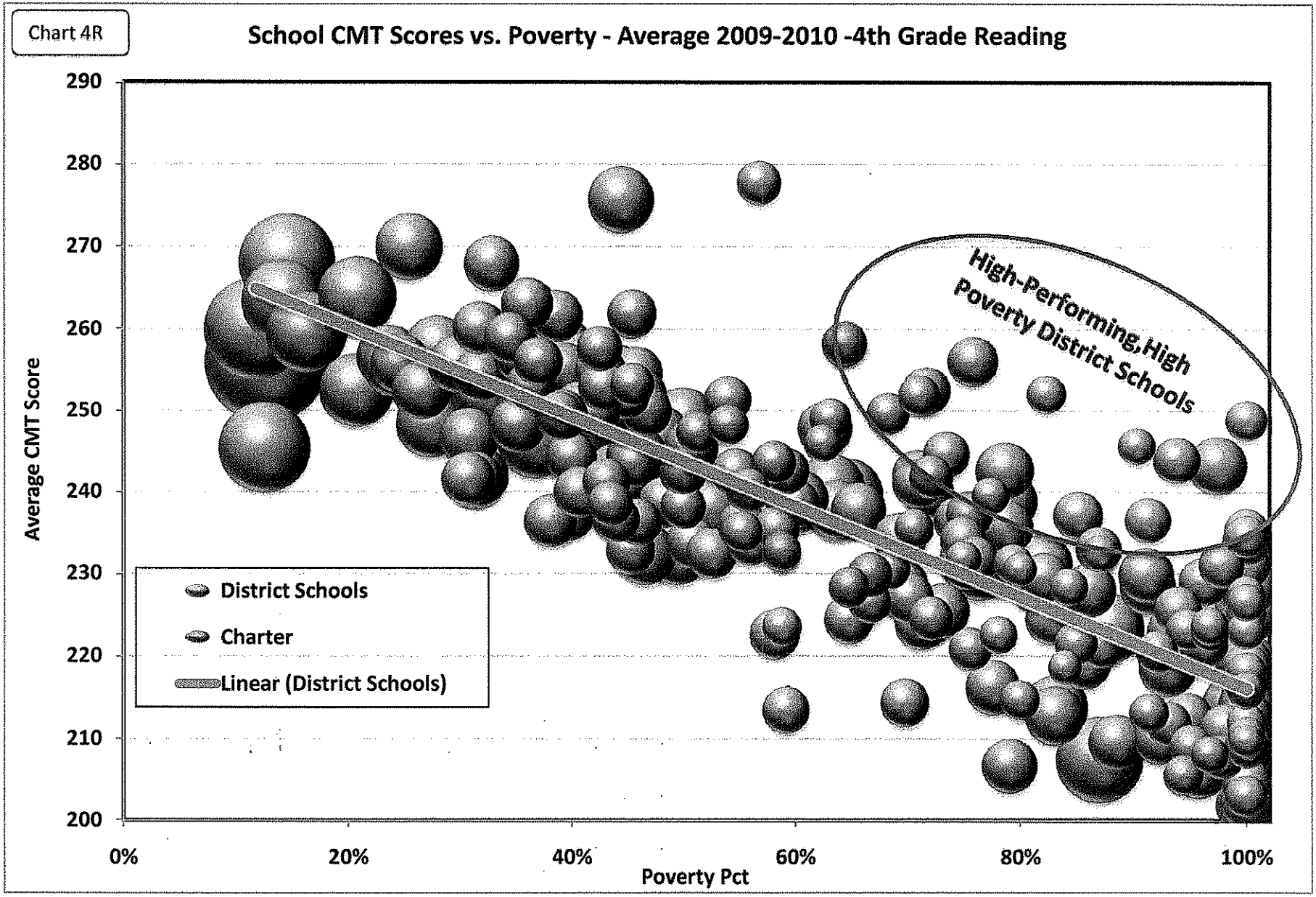
Chart 4R
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - Average 2009-2010 -4th Grade Reading
Average CMT Score
290
280
270
260
250
240
230
220
210
200
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Poverty Pct
High-Performing, High Poverty District Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

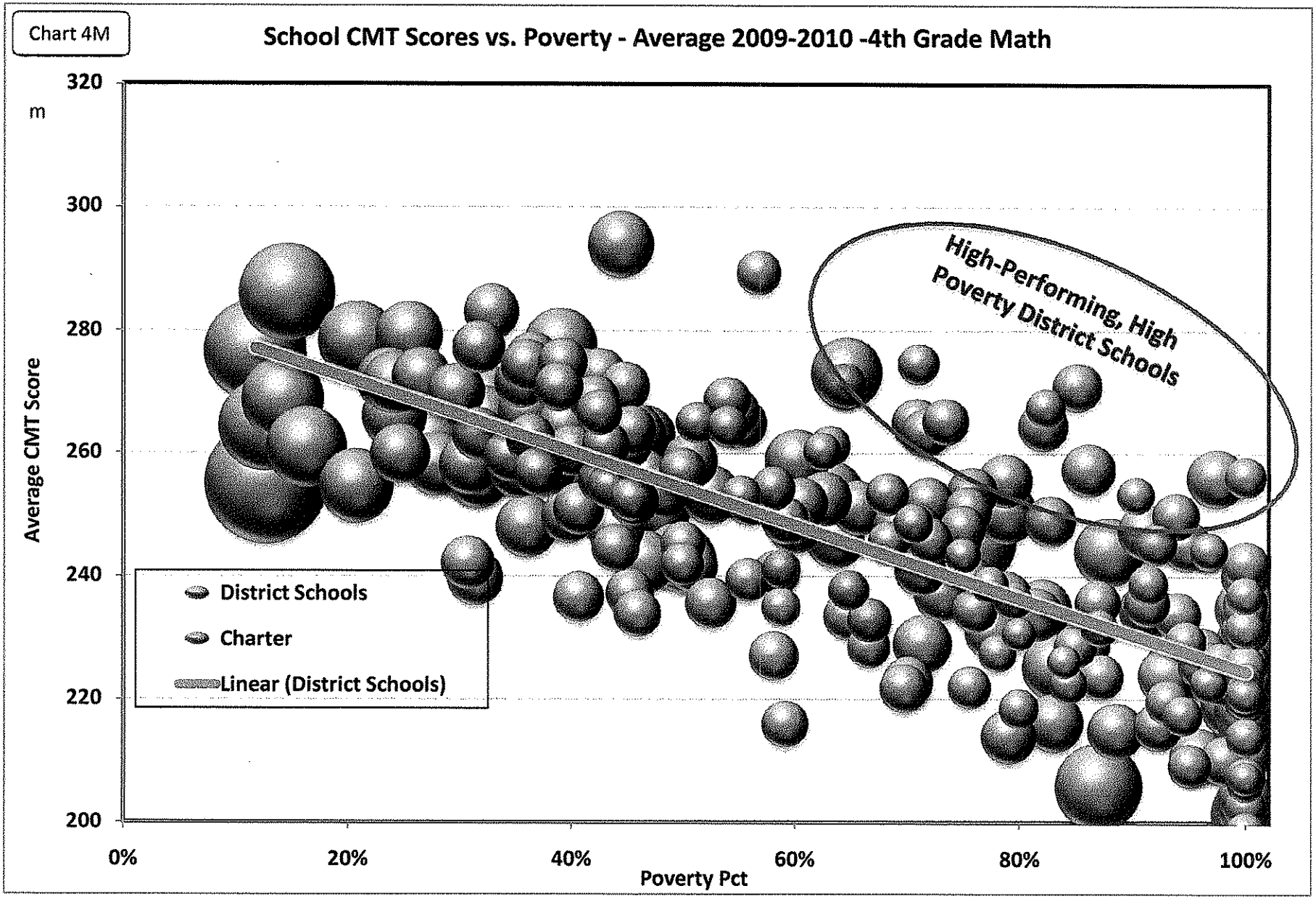
Chart 4M
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - Average 2009-2010 -4th Grade Math
320
m
300
280
260
240
220
200
Average CMT Score
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Poverty Pct
High-Performing, High Poverty District Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

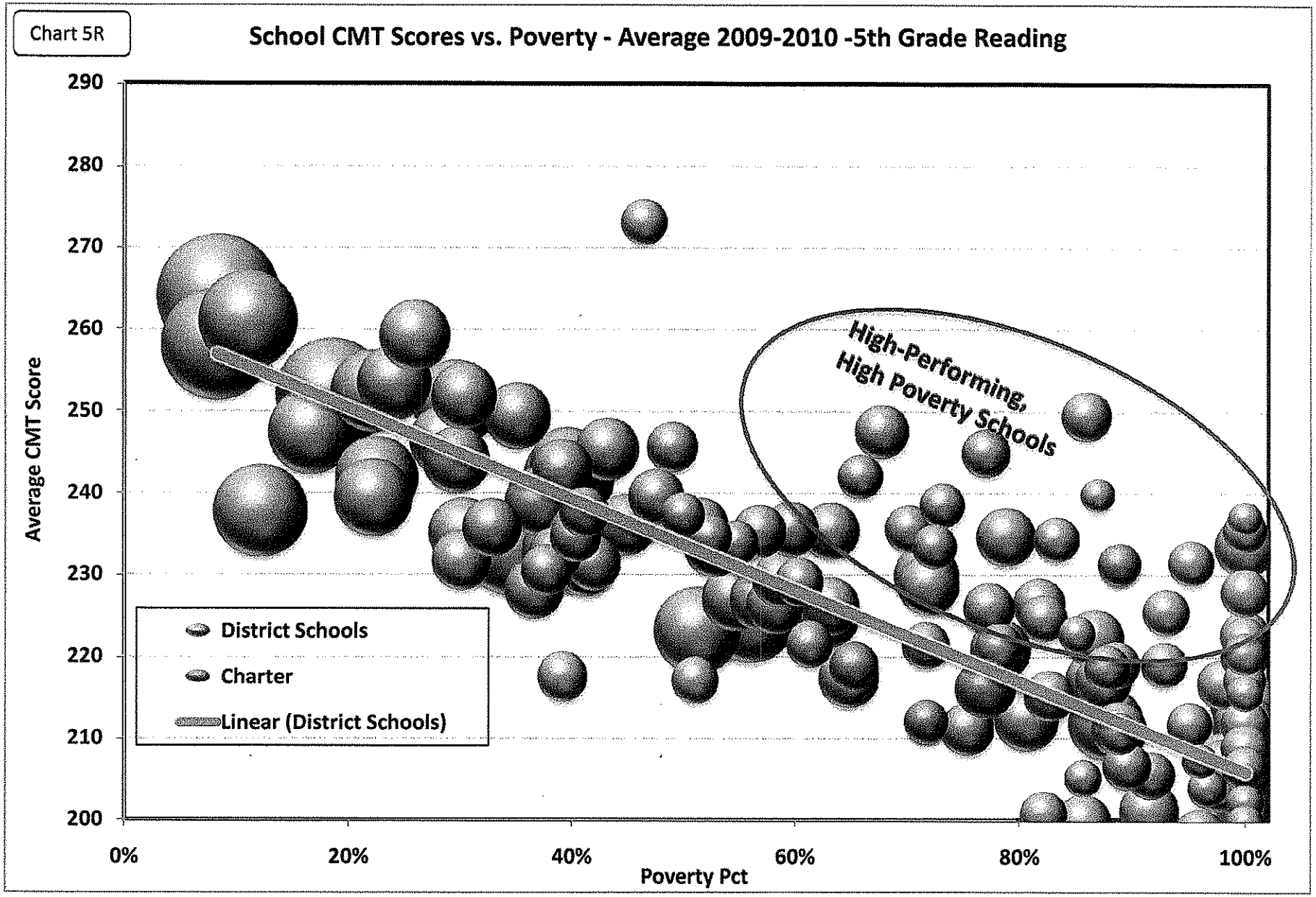
Chart 5R
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - Average 2009-2010 -5th Grade Reading
Average CMT Score
290
280
270
260
250
240
230
220
210
200
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Poverty Pct
High-Performing, High Poverty Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

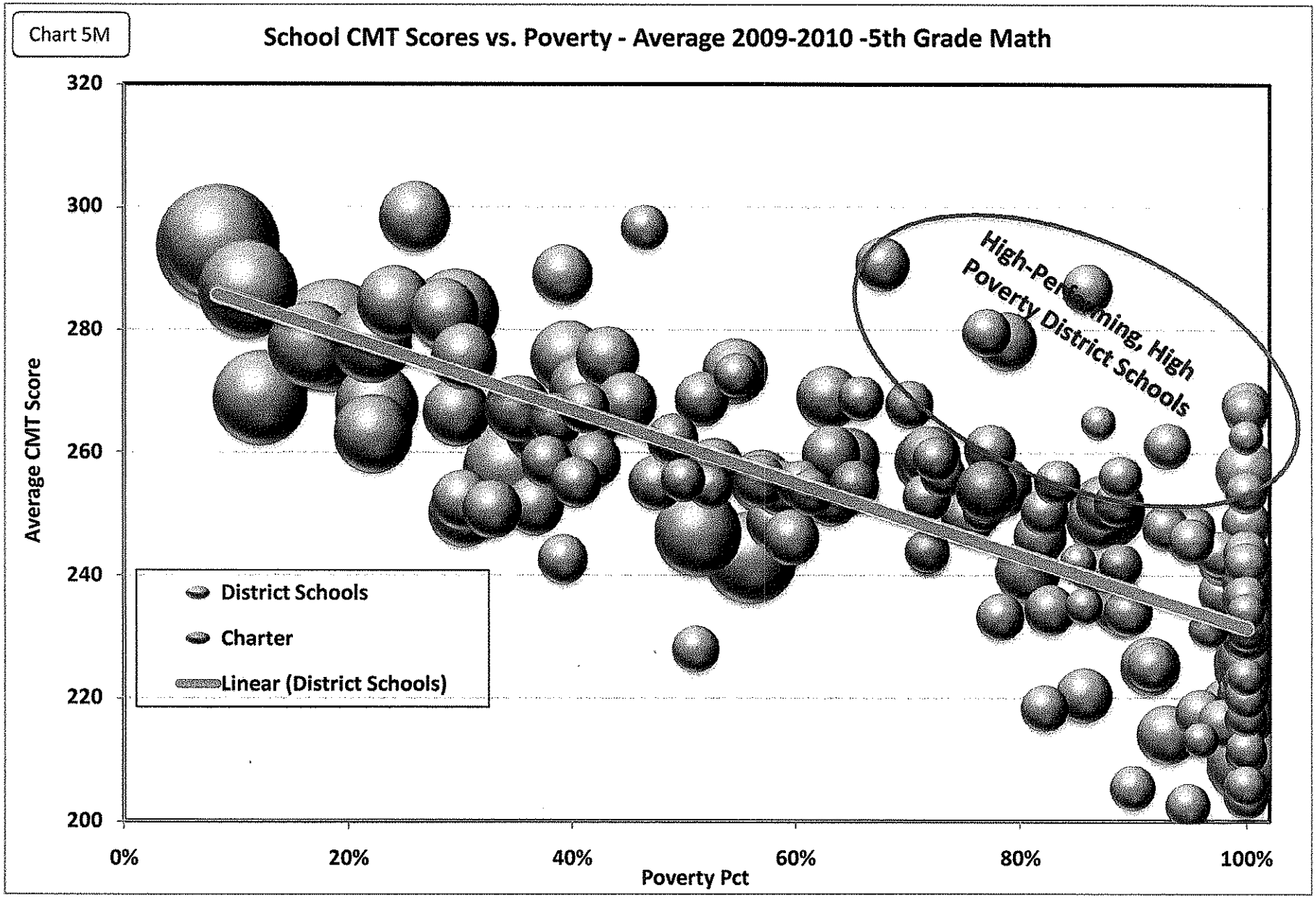
Chart 5M
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - Average 2009-2010 -5th Grade Math
Average CMT Score
320
300
280
260
240
220
200
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Poverty Pct
High-Performing, High Poverty District Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

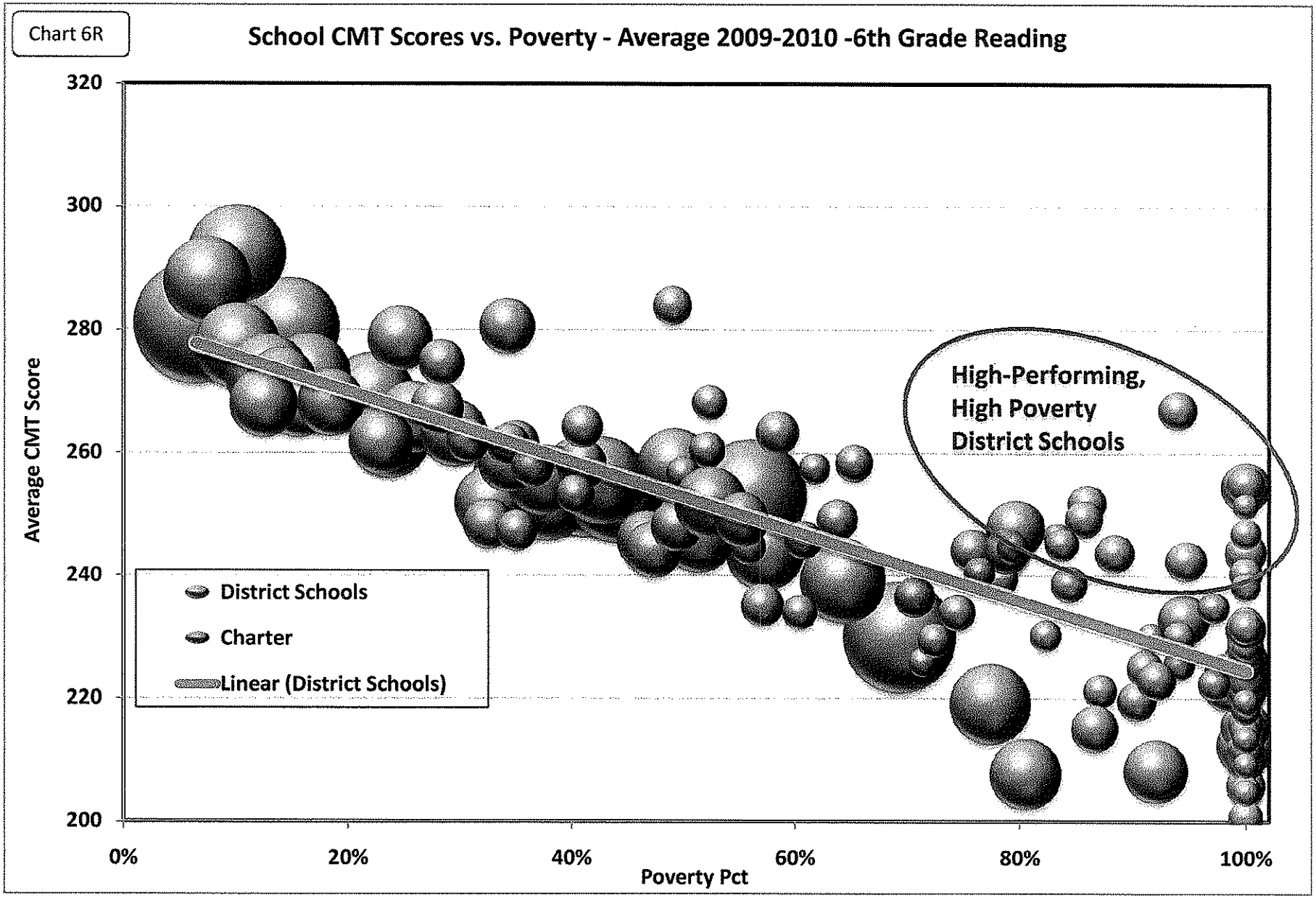
Chart 6R
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - Average 2009-2010 -6th Grade Reading
320
300
280
260
240
220
200
Average CMT Score
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Poverty Pct
High-Performing,
High Poverty
District Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

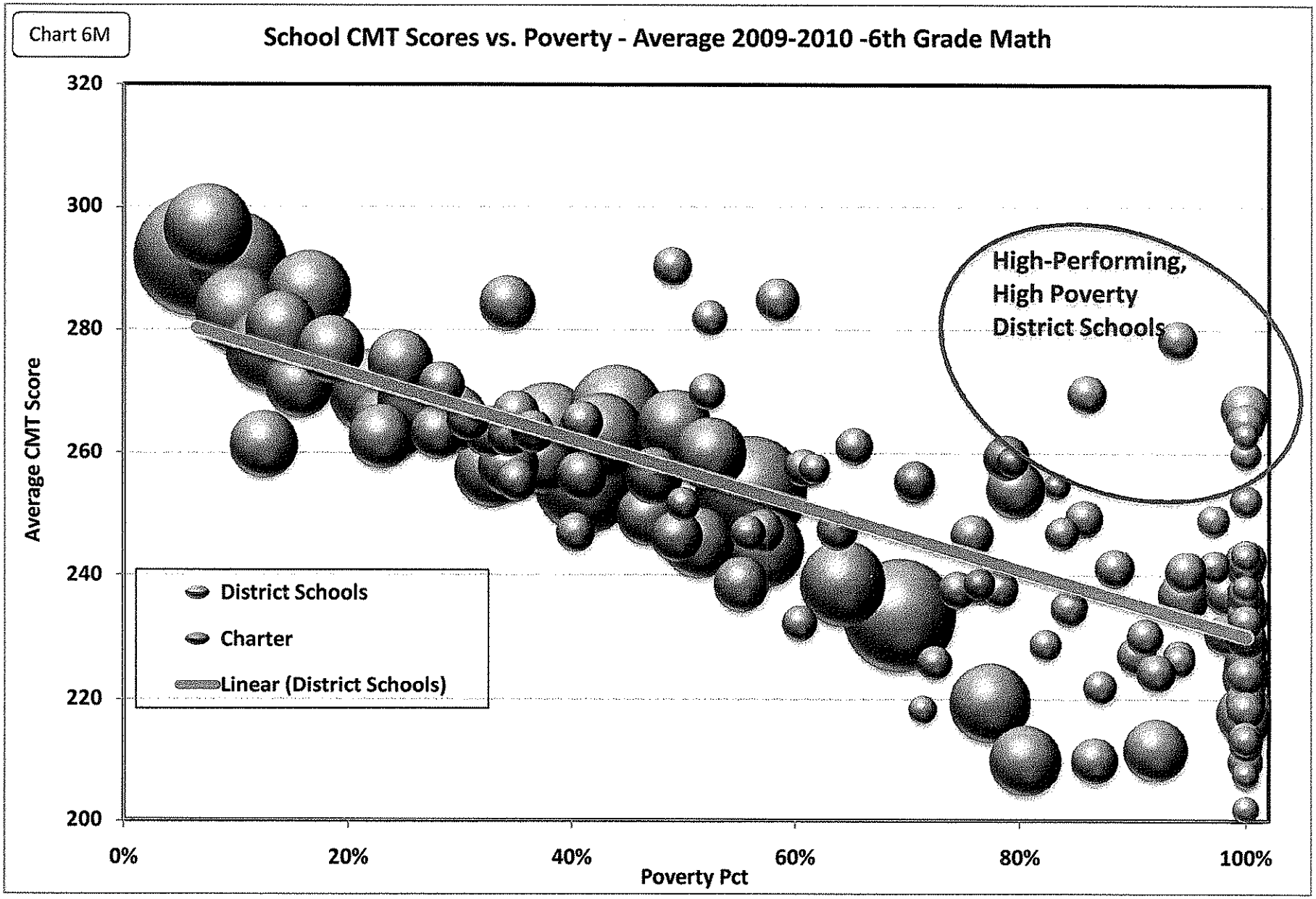
Chart 6M
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - Average 2009-2010 -6th Grade Math
Average CMT Score
320
300
280
260
240
220
200
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Poverty Pct
High-Performing, High Poverty District Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

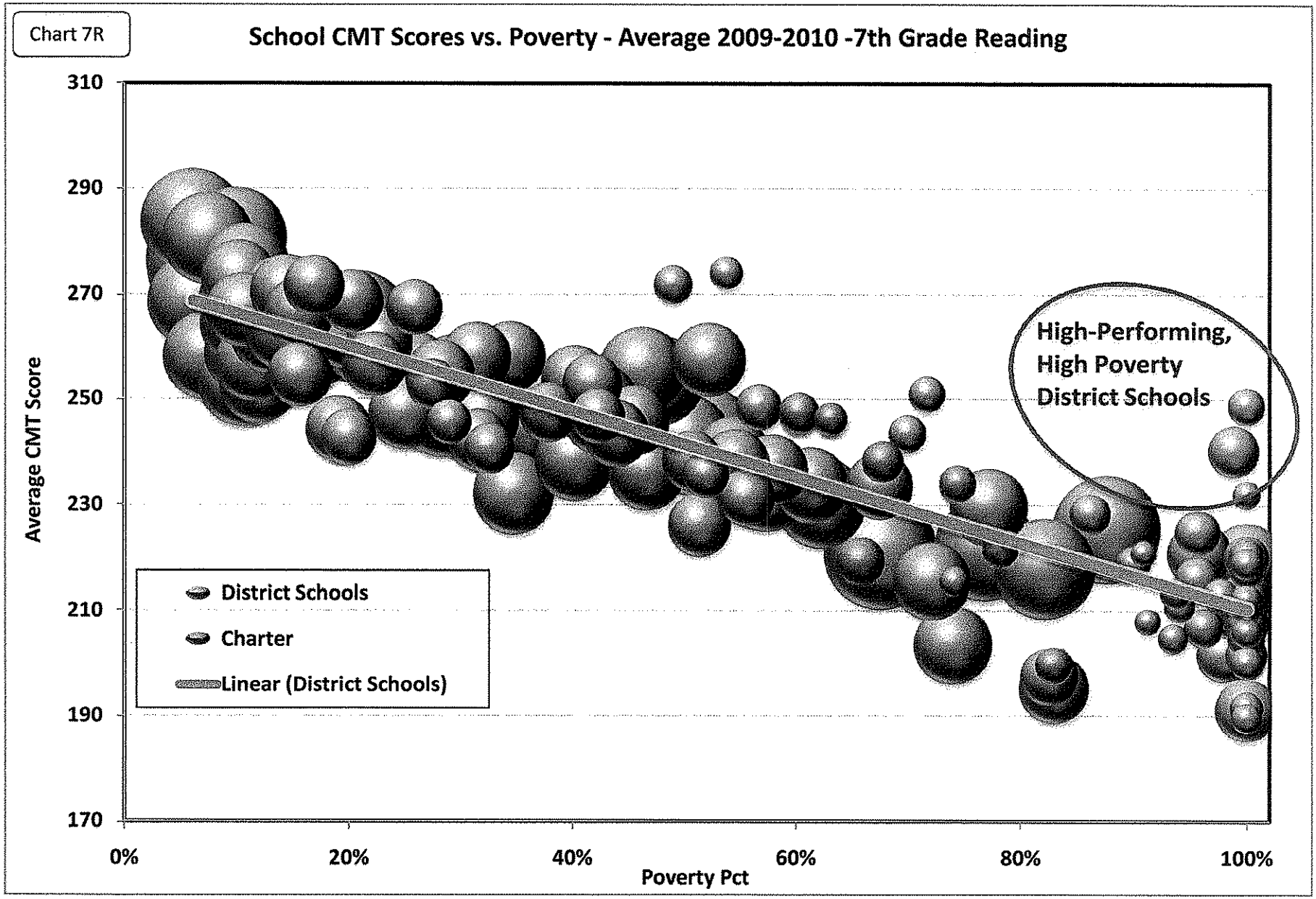
Chart 7R
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - Average 2009-2010 -7th Grade Reading
Average CMT Score
310
290
270
250
230
210
190
170
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Poverty Pct
High-Performing, High Poverty District Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

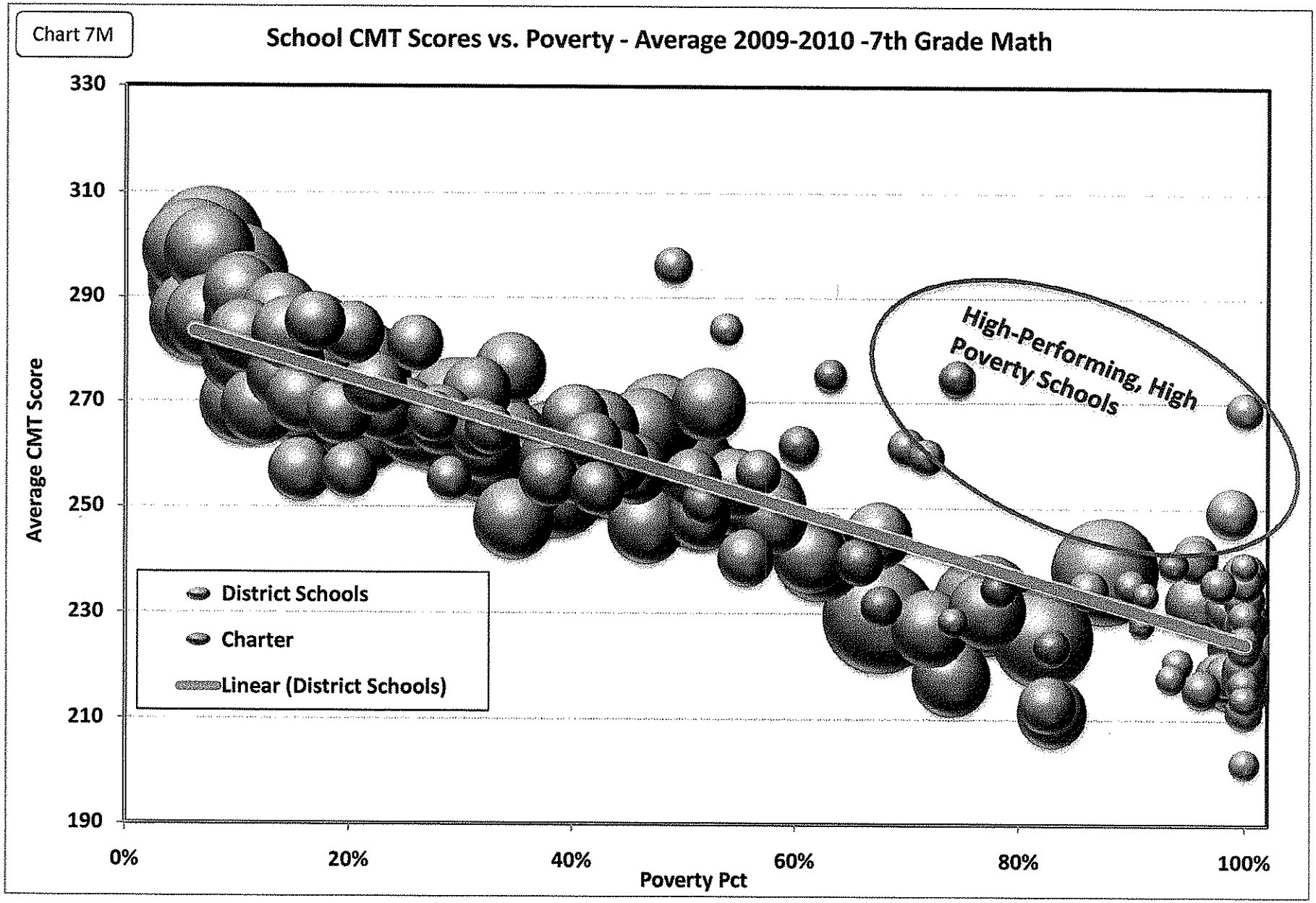
Chart 7M
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - Average 2009-2010 -7th Grade Math
Average CMT Score
330
310
290
270
250
230
210
190
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Poverty Pct
High-Performing, High Poverty Schools
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)

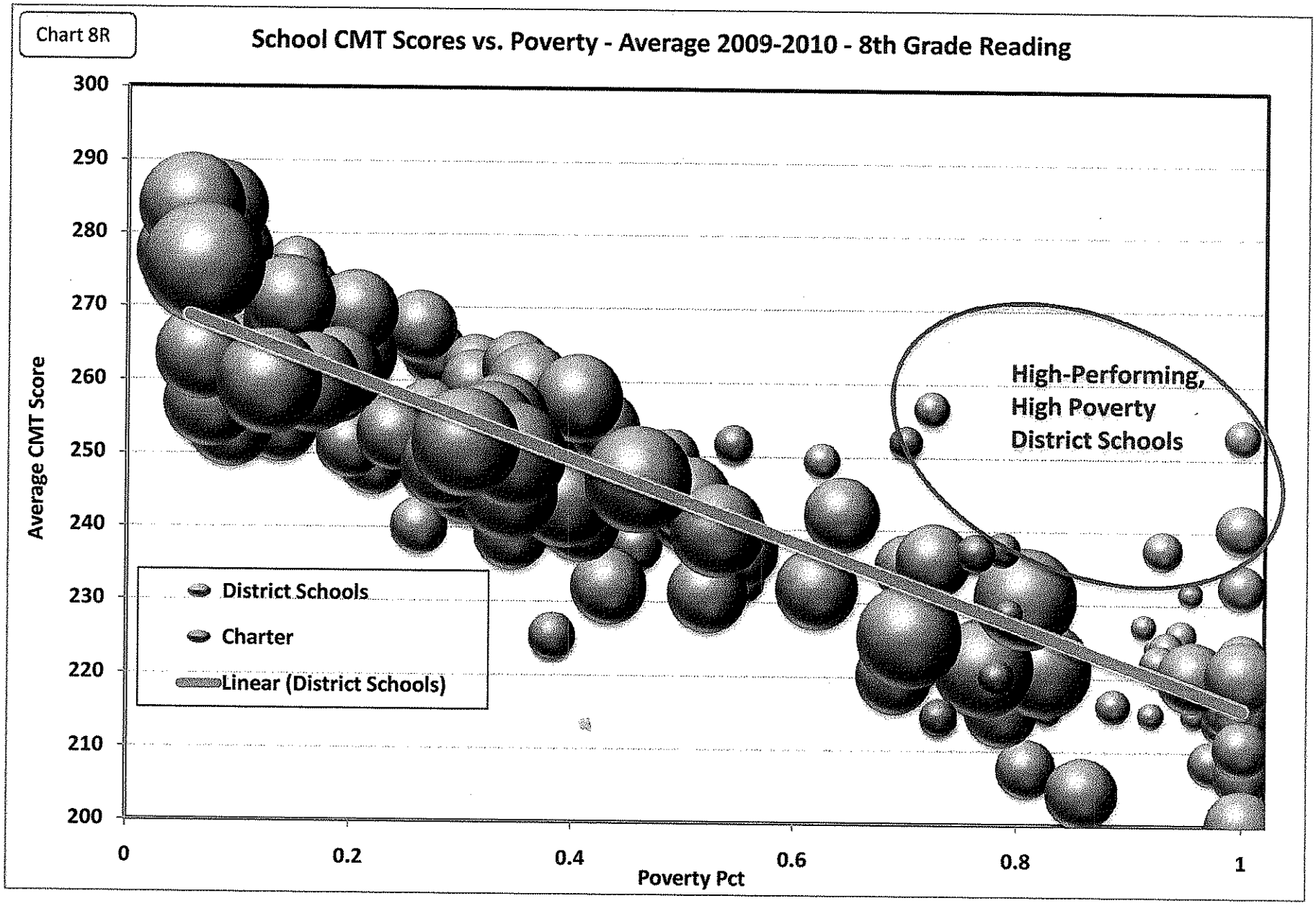
Chart 8R
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty - Average 2009-2010 - 8th Grade Reading
Average CMT Score
300
290
280
270
260
250
240
230
220
210
200
0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
1
Poverty Pct
District Schools
Charter
Linear (District Schools)
High-Performing,
High Poverty
District Schools

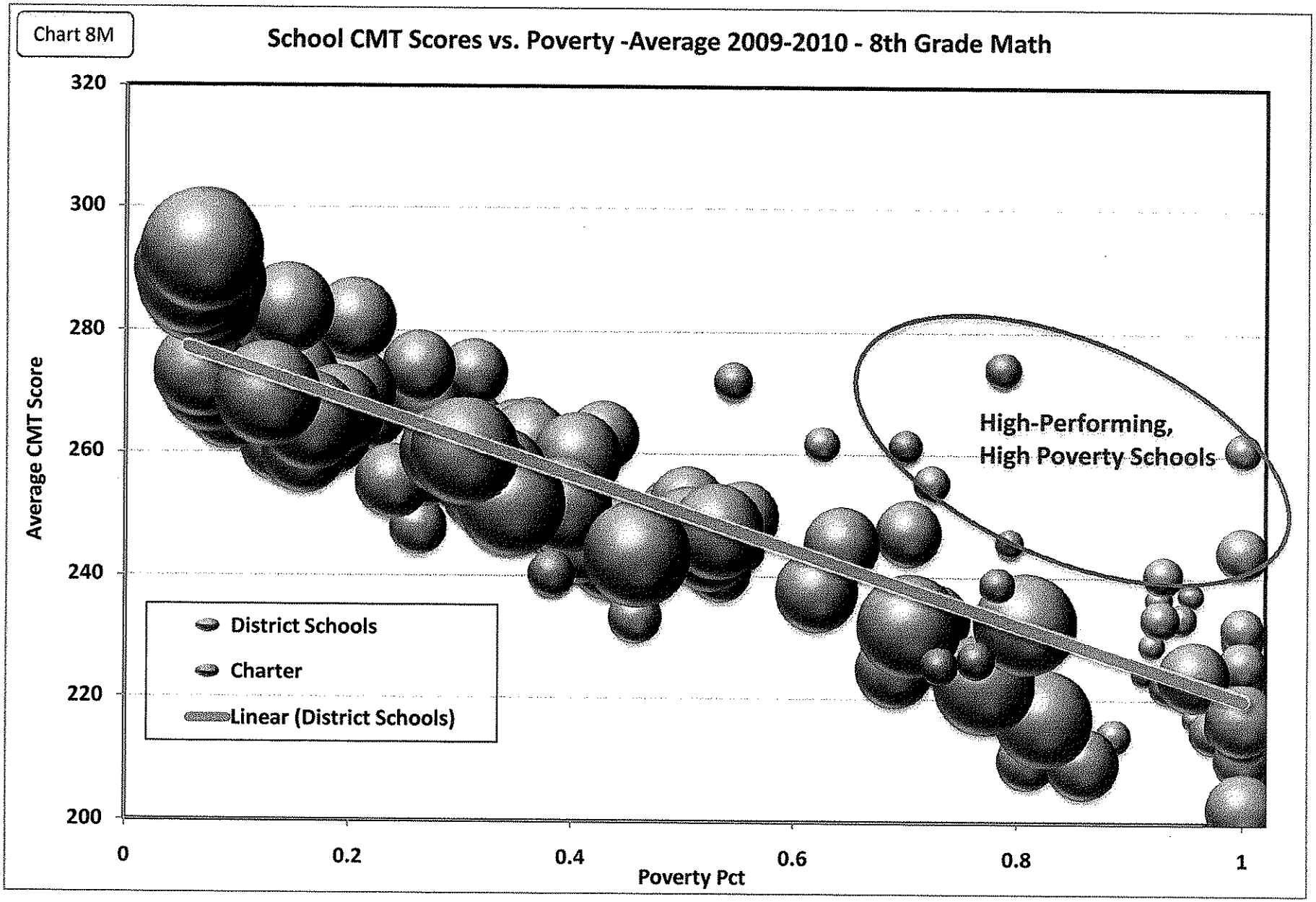
Chart 8M
School CMT Scores vs. Poverty -Average 2009-2010 - 8th Grade Math
Average CMT Score
320
300
280
260
240
220
200
0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
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